

Chapter 0097

(Lily POV)

After I finished telling James what I knew about the night that Stephanie died, we sat silently for over an hour. We each were processing the weight of my words. For me, it was the weight of re-living the memories. For him, it was the weight of hearing the story for the first time.

I was not sure what James was thinking and whether he believed me, but the longer that we sat there in silence, the more I wondered if he might.

Eventually, I felt James begin to rub circles on my back again. This time, I did not brush his hand away. This time — given that I was no longer actively re-living the memory of my almost rape— I felt comforted by the gesture.

I looked up at James, meeting his blue eyes for the first time since the beginning of the story. I could see his flurry of emotions, and I felt badly for him. I had always known that my sister and Sheila had a horrible, evil side to them, so even if the night Stephanie died was traumatizing to me, it was not shocking. James, on the other hand, had loved Stephanie and had trusted Sheila. I could only begin to imagine what he might be feeling. 1

"Question 2," I spoke softly.

"What? You want to keep going with the game?" James asked in shock.

"Don't you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. How much worse will it get?"

I gave him a sad smile, and then I reached out and squeezed his hand. "I think that was the worst of it."

He nodded, although he did not seem completely convinced. "Okay. Go ahead."

"Question 2. Do you believe me?"

James looked at me in disbelief. "That is your question?"

"Yes."

"Talk about meeting an eye for an eye."

I smiled. "Yes, but your answer to my question should be a lot shorter."

James ran one of his hands through his hair.

"I don't know."

I looked away, feeling hurt although not surprised.

He gently grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him again.

"What I mean is, I don't know what to think right now. I


believe you. Luke believes you. But neither of us want to. It is a lot to process. What you are saying, it changes everything. I feel like I am stuck in the middle of a tornado's funnel cloud and I am being lifted off the ground with debris flying everywhere, and here you are asking me in the middle of it all if I believe that there is solid ground underneath me. Deep down, I know that there is, but at the moment, all I can see is the storm."

"Are you saying that I am the storm?"

"No, I am saying that what happened that night is the storm. My life is the storm. The feelings and beliefs that I have held my whole life are the storm. You, Lily, are the stable ground underneath. I want to believe you, and deep down I do... but it is hardso incredibly hard... to see past the chaos of the storm."

His metaphor was a little strange, but it somehow made sense to me.

As I sat there thinking through the metaphor, I felt an unexplainable, irrational, and sudden urge to offer James some sort of comfort or reassurance. My resulting actions shocked even me, and a part of me knew I might come to regret them. Nevertheless, at that moment, they felt like the right thing to do. Perhaps I only felt that way because it was getting late and I was tired, or maybe perhaps it was because I too still felt overwhelmed by a chaos of conflicting emotions. Or perhaps it was that the honesty in James' words stirred something in my heart.

 +15 BONUS

Whatever it was that motivated me, I soon found myself reaching up and pulling James' face to my own. And then I kissed him. [1](#)

The kiss felt very different than the one that I had had with Brady. Whereas the one with Brady was filled with a sense of desperation and lust, this one was filled with a sense of comfort and emotion. This kiss felt almost as though we were trying to communicate something through the kiss that we could not communicate in words.

When the kiss was over, James looked at me somewhat breathless and in surprise. "What was that?" he asked me.

I looked down, suddenly feeling shy. "That was me trying to remind you that the stable ground does exist."

James did not say anything, so I quickly added an apology. "I am sorry... I should not have done that."

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Chapter 0098

I felt James shake his head. "No... I think you should have. And I think I need another reminder."

With that, James leaned down and kissed me again. This time, the sparks were even more prominent. They were definitely getting stronger.

"Question 3. How did you manage to leave the pack on the day of the rejection? The pack borders were sealed immediately, but no one could ever find you. We were not even sure that you survived."

"I do not know," I responded honestly. "All I remember is running towards the forest. Just before I got there, I felt multiple hands on me. I passed out, only to wake up days later."

"You were kidnapped? Or rescued?"

I shook my head. "You just broke a game rule. One question at a time."

James shrugged and started to pull off his shirt. I felt my breath catch as his six-pack stomach was revealed.

"S-stop," I stumbled.

James dropped his shirt and smirked. "You ok?"

I rolled my eyes. "Take off your shoes first."

James continued to smirk at me, but nevertheless took off his shoes.

"Your turn."

"Question 4. Save."

"Huh?"

"I do not have a question right now, but I probably will in the future. So I will save it."

"You can't do that."

"Why not? New rule: any questions not used tonight can be used at a later time and date."

James' eyes widened. "Do you mean that there will be a future date?" he asked hopefully.

My face fell as I realized what I had accidentally implied. I got up from James' lap and walked towards the fire again. "James, I ----"

"Question 5. Will I see or talk to you after tonight?"

My heart started racing. I briefly considered exercising a veto, but I knew that would not be fair to either of us.

I felt myself on the verge of tears. Again. What is it about James that gets me this emotional all the time?

I looked at the fire, then at the ocean, and then at the security guards nearby. I also reached out to Rose. I wanted someone or something else to answer this question for me, because I did not want to.

But, of course, I had to.

"James, I have had a good time with you tonight. I can tell that you have changed, and I can tell that you regret the past. My heart desperately wants to give you a chance. If things were different, I probably would. But I am who I am, and you are who you are, and West Mountain Pack is what it is."

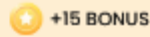
James stood up and walked closer to me. I could tell tears were starting to well up in his eyes, too.

"What do you mean, Lily? What are you trying to say?"

"I mean that I have been hurt. And I am damaged. And no matter how much you regret your actions and how much you say sorry, a part of me will always be broken. You are not the only one to blame. There were a lot of things that happened at West Mountain Pack; I have not even told you about all of them.

Even if I wanted to go back there, I do not think it would be healthy for me to. The pack will never accept me as its luna, and I will never be able to get out from under the shadow of their love and mourning for Stephanie.

And so where does that leave us? You are the future alpha



of a pack that I do not think I can ever go back to. Even if I wanted a future with you, James, I do not know how it would be possible.”

I watched as the tears started to fall down James’ cheeks. I reached up and wiped them from his eyes, even though tears were now actively falling from mine as well.

“Lily, please do not say that. Please. I will fix it. I will. Please. Just give me time.”

“James, this is not just about me. You deserve to move on, too. I am sure that you will find a second-chance mate soon. And the two of you can have a relationship without all the baggage that a relationship between you and I would have.”

James wrapped his arms around me. “I do not want anyone else, Lily. I want you.”

I returned his hug, wrapping my arms around him as tightly as I could. Continuing to cry, I whispered, “I wish things could be different, James. I really do.”